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Religion and Environmental Worldviews

by

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Religion and Environmental Worldviews

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University of Nebraska, 2014

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Abstract

This study examined religion's role in forming an environmental worldview. It was hypothesized that the more religious one is, the more anthropocentric their worldview would be. It is imperative to find what influences values so steps can be made to promote pro-environmental behavior. If religion is found to influence one's behavior and worldview, the social structure of religion could be a possible avenue for encouraging an ecocentric worldview. A survey was conducted and dispersed at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, targeting college-aged students. It was found that although religion does influence behavior, it cannot be concluded that religion influences environmental worldviews.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine religions role in forming an environmental worldview. An environmental worldview is “what people believe is right and wrong environmental behavior” (Miller, 2008). In understanding the role religion has, it can then be determined if religious social structures are a viable option to promote positive environmental behavior. In order to accomplish this task, the connection between religion, values, and behaviors was established. However, it first needs to be discussed why this work is important.

Year after year, scientists release statements stating the earth has seen a new record-setting level of carbon emissions (Cook et al., 2008). This is not new news, however, but the implications of failing to address this issue is becoming exponentially more serious. Such record emissions for life on earth have already been detrimental in the form of species extinction, depletion of natural resources, and large-scale environmental degradation. With carbon emissions reaching a total of 402 ppm and growing, it is crucial to motivate others to acknowledge and act on these environmental issues (Cook et al., 2008). The next question that was then asked, was how do we motivate others to not only acknowledge the severity of these issues, but to change their behaviors to address these environmental issues?

It has been shown that “values...motivate us to act”, and depending on our values different actions will be taken (Blackmore et al., 2013). To promote positive environmental behaviors, the values that influence those behaviors needed to be studied. It is known that “family, peers, the workplace, educational institutions, significant life events, religion, music, media, technology, culture, and major historical events” all develop values, and the associated behaviors derived from those values (State of New South Wales, 2009). Of these common influencers, religion has been repeatedly cited for influencing environmental degradation (White,

1967, Greeley 1993). Shedding light on these claims, and understanding the role of religion in forming an environmental worldview, has potential implications for change.

If religion was found to play a role in forming an environmental worldview, one potential implication could be to use religious social structures to promote valuing the environment. An important goal would be to promote the ecocentric worldview, which holds the belief that nature does not exist for humans, but that humans are a part of the system and promotes using natural resources sustainably (Miller, 2008). Using religious social structures may be more complicated if it is found that religions are instead instilling values that support the anthropocentric worldview. The anthropocentric worldview supports the idea that humans are the dominant species and that humans can manage all of the earth's systems through the use of science and technology (Miller, 2008). However, if it is found that religion does not play a role in forming either environmental worldview, religious social structures are not automatically barred from being a possible avenue to promote the ecocentric worldview. It could simply mean religious figureheads or doctrines have not addressed this topic. Investigating the role that religion plays with respect to environmental values may provide insight on a possible route to influence societal behavior, with the hope of enacting change. Regardless of the findings, certain actions can be taken to move society forward on the issue of environmental degradation.

As mentioned, religion has often been cited for promoting values that form anthropocentric worldviews, which are thought to lead to poor environmental practices. "Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropogenic religion the world has seen. When God shaped Adam he was foreshadowing the image of the incarnate Christ, the Second Adam. Man shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's

will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (Lynn White, Jr., 1967). White states that most of the world’s mythologies provided stories of creation, but the early teachings of Christian creation inherited a much different story. The Christian story of creation presents time as non-repetitive and linear, giving all items in creation to man’s benefit and rule. This stems from Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (The Bible). White had largely supported his arguments using passages from The Bible.

Andrew Greeley also studied religion and the environment, comparing religion’s views on the environment. Greeley used a person's willingness to spend money on the environment as an indicator of valuing the environment. Greeley's results indicated there was a negative correlation between one’s willingness to spend money and how dedicated they considered themselves to be to their religion (Greeley, 1993).

Another integral study in this area is that of P. Wesley Schultz, Lynnette Zelezny and Nancy J. Dalrymple (Schultz et al., 2000). They conducted a multinational study using “the revised New Ecological Paradigm (NEP), a measure of biblical literalism, and a measure of religious importance (Schultz et al., 2000). In this study it was hypothesized that the division of worldviews would depend on the extent to which one believes the bible is the literal word of God, or if they see it as a divinely inspired book with some human errors. Schultz and his colleagues address this split by asking for each participant’s perception of the bible, ranging from the “actual word of God” to an “ancient book of history and legends” (Schultz et al., 2000). They also asked how important religion is to each individual, trying to get an understanding of how religious that specific person is (Schultz et al., 2000). They also accounted

for other general demographics. Overall, Schultz and his colleagues concluded that “these findings are consistent with previous research and support White’s (1967) argument” (Schultz et al., 2000). They found that those with Christian beliefs have “an anthropocentric basis for environmental concern,” meaning they may still be worried about the environment, but their concerns are based on the needs of humans, and not plants and animals (Schultz et al., 2000).

Other researches, such as Max Oelshlaeger offer additional views on this topic. Like White, Max Oelschlaeger notes “religion, especially Judeo-Christianity, thwarts rather than advances any societal effort to achieve sustainability” (Oelschlaeger, 1994). However, unlike White, Oelshlaeger goes on to say that the inherent prejudice against religion should be reevaluated. Viewing religion as the enemy provides an unnecessary roadblock in the collective efforts to develop more useful habits of action. Change will only happen when we come together as a people rather than claiming a “bad guy” who destroys nature and a “good guy” who protects nature. We are only destroying our chances of solidarity, which is needed to change behavior. He believes that “religion is the most likely way that Americans can move themselves to care for creation” (Oelschlaeger, 1994). However, this is not a claim that religion is a solve-all solution, but rather that it has an integral part and function in the larger process. With 78% of Americans stating that religion acts as a socially motivating source, religion must be addressed (Gallup Poll, 2009).

Since White’s original 1967 paper, blaming religion for the world’s environmental issues, a major religious figurehead attempted to address this topic. Pope John Paul II is recognized as one of the most “influential spiritual leaders of our time”, by Christians and followers of other faiths too (Kasimow, 2013). In 1989, Pope John Paul II addressed the issue of environmental degradation by announcing it as a moral issue (John Paul, 1989). He stated “faced with the

widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. . . . [A] new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge” (usccb.org, 2000). Pope John Paul II expanded on the book of Genesis, targeting the passage where God gave Adam and Eve dominion over all creation (John Paul, 1989). Many people have argued that this passage inherently placed humans above all other creatures (White, 1967). However, Pope John Paul II states that soon after this relationship was established, Adam and Eve “destroyed the existing harmony by deliberately going against the Creator's plan, that is, by choosing to sin”, which disrupted the relationship between humans and the earth (John Paul, 1989). Pope John Paul continued, saying “when man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not at peace with God, than earth itself cannot be at peace” (John Paul, 1989). This disconnect between humans and the environment, according to Pope John Paul II, has become a moral issue on the grounds that the issue stems from a “lack of respect for life” (John Paul, 1989). John Paul II recognized the importance of non-human life and called on Christians to change their behavior (John Paul, 1989). The conflicting views offered by White from citing The Bible then by the Pope can offer some complexities when trying to understand the role of religion in the formation of worldviews. It appears then that biblical literalism, or how exact one takes The Bible’s message to be, may influence the values they receive from the religion. This was addressed and studied in this paper.

Luckily, it can be seen that change is already starting to happen. Faith communities are beginning to mobilize, specifically in America, to take action to mitigate climate change and to engage in the environmental movement. In 2004, master’s student Gretchen Hughes Lieberman, of the University of Oregon, investigated faith-based environmentalism in four

congregations (Lieberman, 2004). She found that there is growing evidence of an environmental movement within the religious sector, however only in some congregations. It appears there are major differences with denominational social teachings on how their religion affects action toward treatment and care of the environment. Lieberman (2004) concludes that Christianity is not inherently anti-environmental; in fact many of the faith believe that God has in fact called us to protect the environment and respect it as God's creation (Lieberman, 2004). However, she found that only a very small percentage of religious communities are doing anything to tie together their faith to environmental concerns. (Lieberman, 2004). E.O. Wilson, a highly awarded scientist who has been hailed as one of America's 25 most influential people, wrote a book entitled The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth. He attempts to bridge the gap between religion and science to serve a common goal. He writes with the goal of sustaining life on this planet, and not only the human race but every species of life. He argues that nature is not only an entity to society, but is also vital to our physical and spiritual well-being. In 2007 there was a hearing before the committee on Environment and Public Works United States Senate. This hearing examined the view of religious organizations regarding climate change. It is a document of witnesses "representing over 100 million Americans of faith who are joining together to protect God's creation...Americans are coming together, calling for action and our common values are bringing us together. This is coming from the people, from the ground up." Herb Grover, Dean of the School of Math and Sciences of Wayland Baptist University stated in the hearing, "By not caring for creation, we are actually diminishing the positive impact of God's creation on other believers or potential believers." (Senate Hearing 110-1092).

Though disagreements are still fervently present, religious leaders and environmentalist have reached a consensus that we must begin emphasizing the role that religion can now play in

helping society improve the environmental crisis (Oelshlaeger, 1994). “Religion remains a very powerful source of values, a powerful source of activities, and a powerful source of community” (Campbell, 2010). Religion also still plays a powerful role in the construct of our society, economic structure, and political system. “By some estimates, these organizations [American Christian Churches] provide \$20 billion worth of privately funded social service delivery for more than 70 million Americans each year. There are significant indications that faith-based social service programs are more effective than their secular counterparts (Fagan, 2006).

There have been many conflicting views on religion and environmental worldviews. Some researchers throw stones at religion, blaming it for instilling an anthropocentric worldview. Others say we should put our stones together and create a foundation for change. Yet, others are still unsure what to think. The purpose of this study is to address the role of religion in forming an environmental worldview.

Materials and Methods

This was a two-part study, each having an objective and hypothesis. The objective for part one was to analyze the relationship between religiosity scores and identified religions among college-aged students. Religiosity measures church member’s commitment to, and practice of, their religion. (Hill et. al, 2000). Religiosity can be used to understand how faithful one is to the teachings of their religion and how often one practices the teachings. Religiosity scores, therefore, are an indication of the expected values gained from following an organized religion. Organized religion is an entity with a name, a constitution and infrastructure; It is also a shifting collection of persons, engaged in a complex set of actions and rhetoric, actions that are supported by and indeed define the collectivity they inhabit (Ammerman, 1997). Examples of organized religions include Christianity, Islam, Mormonism, and Judaism. An example of a non-

organized religion is Agnostic. Comparing one's level of religiosity to their specified religion would indicate if religion is influencing behavior. If it is found that religion influences values, and therefore behavior, there would be a foundation to proceed studying religion's influence on forming environmental worldviews. Religiosity was measured using The Centrality of Religiosity Scale, a common assessment tool in this area (Appendix A). In this assessment, the higher the score the more religious one is. There are not defining categories in this assessment, just a scale for comparison. Additionally, Ekcberg and Blocker's Biblical Literalism assessment tool was used as it was in Schultz and colleagues study (Appendix A). The Biblical Literalism assessment tool allowed for an additional way to analyze the relationship between religion and environmental worldviews. This assessment tool indicated how the participant views the bible, ranging from the literal word of God to a compilation of legends and stories. What should be gained from these assessments leads to the second objective of part one, which aimed to provide the foundation for the analysis of the relationship between religious practice and environmental worldviews.

The objective for part two of the study was to assess the relationship between religiosity and environmental worldviews for college-ages students. Part two of the study closely replicated Schultz and colleagues' methodology, by utilizing the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) (Appendix A). The NEP measured the environmental worldview a participant has, either anthropocentric, moderate, or ecocentric worldview. Each worldview was indicated by falling within a range of scores. Scoring between 30-45 designated an anthropocentric worldview, 46-60 specified a moderate worldview, and a score between 61-75 revealed an ecocentric worldview (Thomas, 2008). Part two posed a second hypothesis for the study that religiosity can be used to predict a person's environmental worldview.

After the survey was designed on Qualtrics using all three assessment tools and included demographic information (Appendix B), it was emailed to University of Nebraska-Lincoln students using Blackboard. In a brief email, students were asked to participate in a 10 minute survey to aid undergraduates in finishing a thesis project. This was a convenient sample for multiple reasons. First, it provided easy access to a large number of participants. Second, university students have a diversity of backgrounds, religions, and gender. A diverse population was important for this study, as different religions were needed, which is why the objectives targeted college-aged students. Participants were given one week to complete the survey before it was closed. All responses were confidential. After one week, 259 surveys were taken, yielding a 14% response rate. Of those 259 surveys, 201 were used. Surveys were excluded if they were incomplete or if the participant was under the age of 19.

The results from the survey were then scored. The average religiosity was found by adding up the scores from the Centrality of Religiosity assessment, providing the level of religiosity for each participant. The scores from all of the questions in the NEP were calculated for each participant, providing information as to what their worldview was. Participants were then classified into their indicated religious preference. These data were then statistically analyzed and graphically expressed. Microsoft Excel, SPSS, SAS, and the UNL Statistics Help Desk were used in analyzing these data.

Results

The objective of part 1 was to analyze the relationship between religiosity scores and identified religions among college-ages students. In focusing on the two observable categories of religion (organized and non-organized), the frequency of participants claiming an organized religion was 68% and non-organized was 32% (Table 1).

Religion	Frequency
Agnostic	18
Atheist	12
Christian	92
Jewish	2
Mormon	4
Muslim	2
None	15
Not Specified	6
Other	12
Roman Catholic	38

Table 1: Frequency table showing how many participants claimed each religion.

Students who identify with an organized have a higher average religiosity scores than non-organized religions (Figure 1). There was a statistically significant difference between the level of religiosity and organized- versus non-organized religions ($p < 0.0001$) regardless of gender (Figure 1).

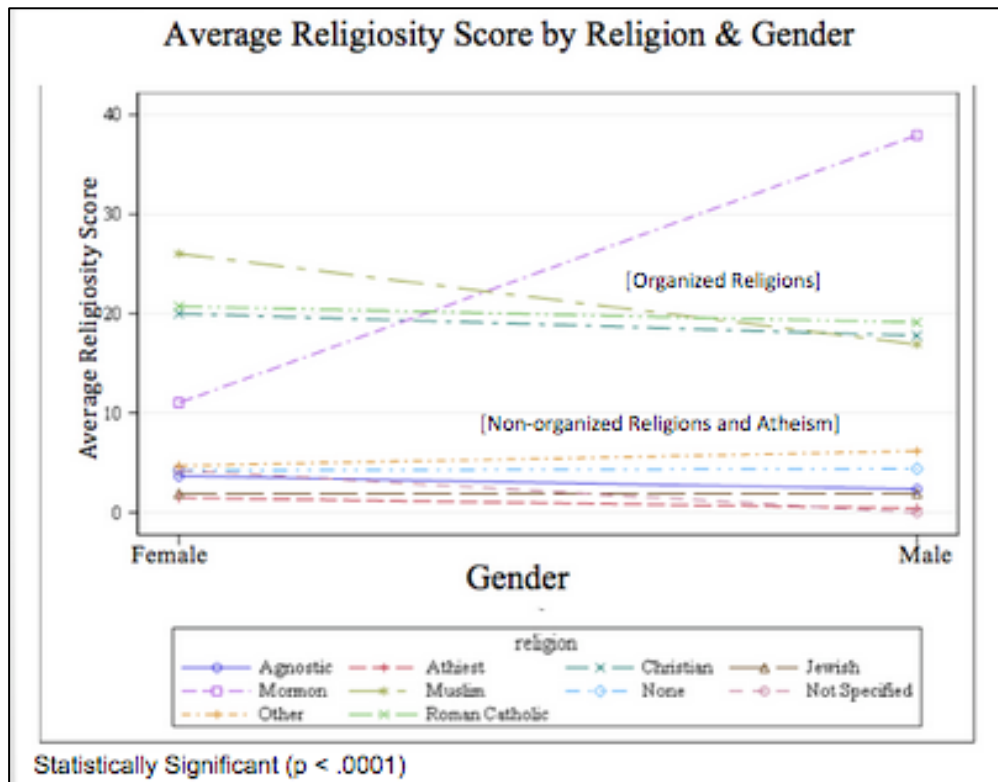


Figure 1: This graph displays the grouping of organized religion vs. non-organized religions using religious affiliation and gender.

Biblical literalism, which measured how literal one takes the Bible, and religiosity scores decrease, while NEP scores go up (Table 2).

Biblical Literalism	Religiosity Score	NEP Score
1.	25.83	49.30
2.	16.91	49.31
3.	4.30	49.86
4.	3.89	50.31

Table 2: Biblical literalism vs. average religiosity score and NEP score.

There was little variation found between NEP scores and religion, but there was an observable trend between claiming religion and religiosity scores.

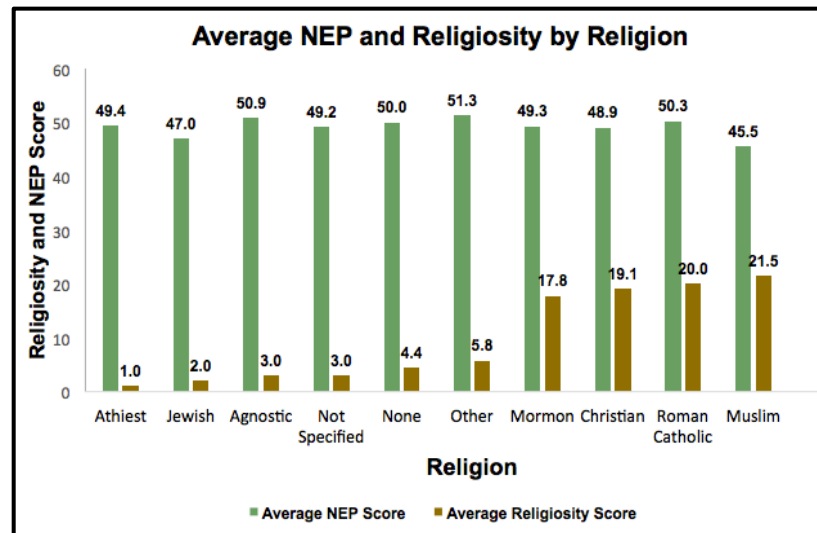


Figure 2: Figure shows average NEP scores and average religiosity scores for each claimed religion.

The objective of part 2 was to then assess the relationship between religiosity and environmental worldviews for college-aged students. As seen in figure 3, there was a statistically significant relationship between religiosity scores and NEP scores ($r=-0.187$; $p=0.0122$).

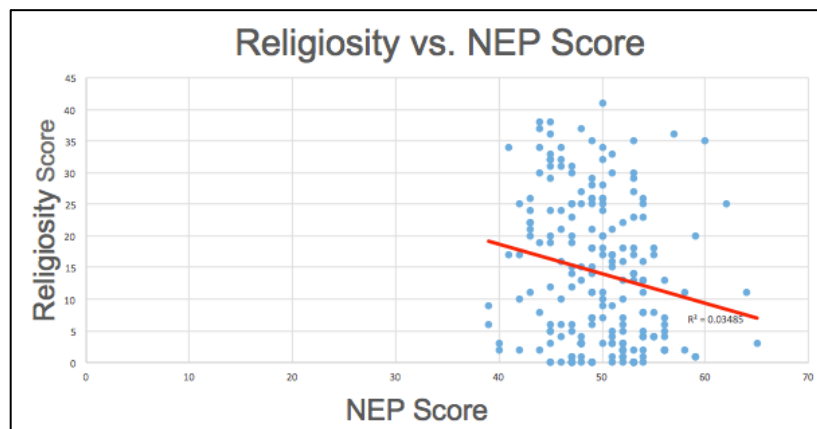


Figure 3: The graph displays a significant interaction between religiosity scores and NEP scores. ($r=-.187$; $p=.0122$)

As seen in figure 4, an overwhelming majority of participants (78.6%) have a mid-range worldview with respect to the environment. Less than a quarter (19.9%) of participants had an anthropocentric worldview, and only 3 participants (1.5%) had an ecocentric worldview.

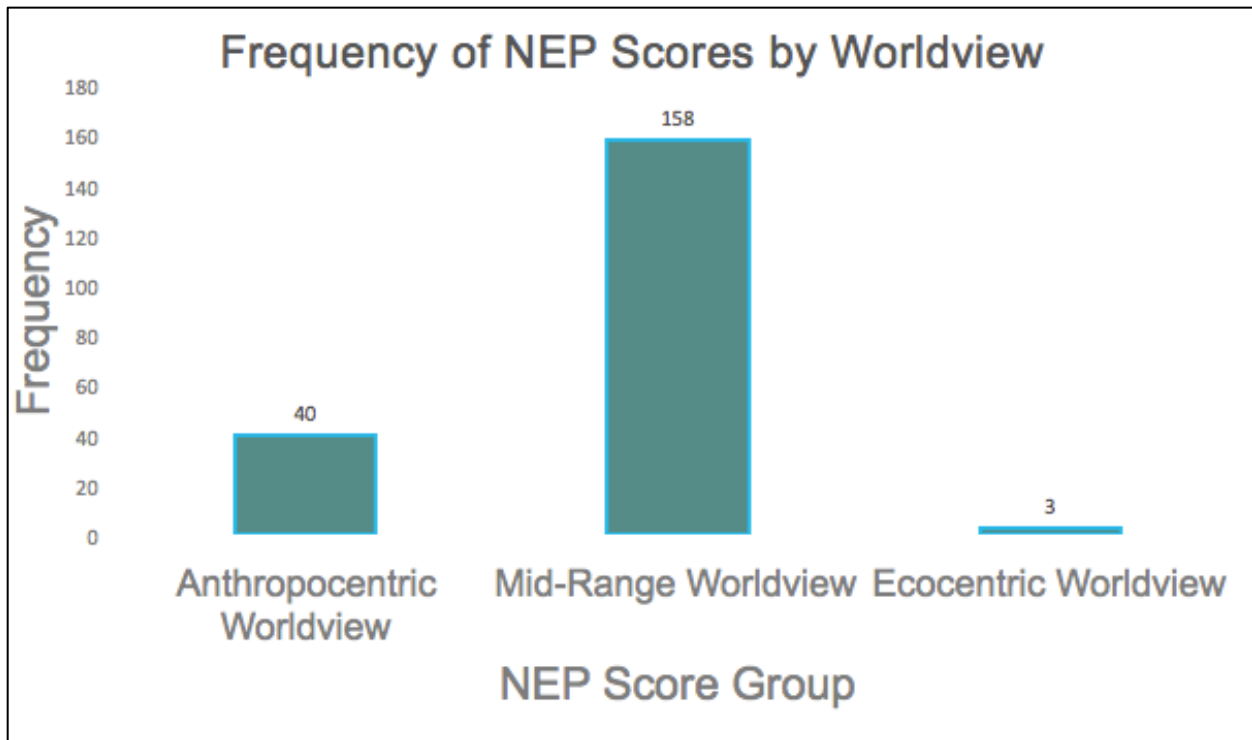


Figure 5 displays that when results were divided up by gender, there was a clear clustering of female participants within a similar range of NEP scores but a wide spread of male participants. For example, there is a large variation between those that did not specify a religion, Mormons, and Christians.

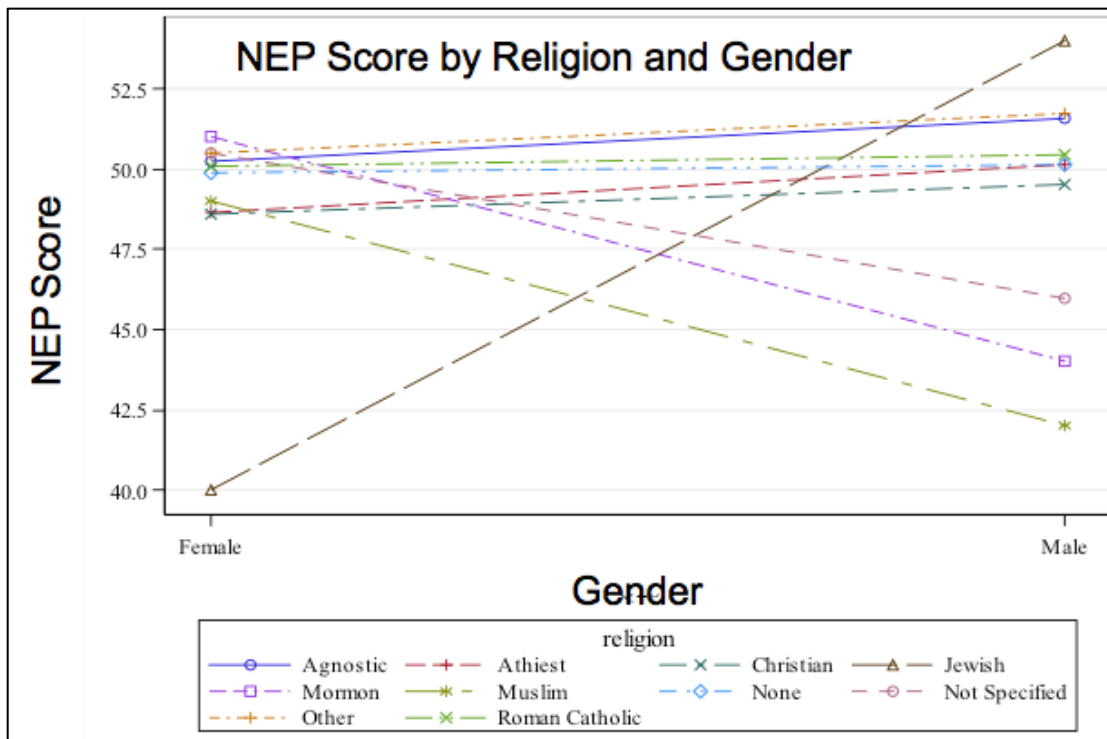


Figure 5: The graph divides the data by gender, in order to give another way to view the relationship of religion and NEP Score

Discussion

In part 1, the relationship between one's claimed religion and their Centrality of Religiosity score was analyzed. Religion was chosen because it was predicted to influence values. Values were then predicted to affect behavior, which in turn motivates actions. Religious social structures were also proposed to be a possible route for encouraging pro-environmental behavior. The benefits of these religious social structures were their large populations, they can be found throughout the world, and they have strong figurehead influences. With the use of figureheads, education on the importance of valuing the environment can be spread more quickly than just by trying to influence the general population through other educational means.

The results show that there was in fact a statistically significant relationship between religion and religiosity ($p > 0.0001$). Those claiming an organized religion had a high level of religiosity and those claiming an unorganized religion, none, or Atheism had a low level of religiosity (Figure 1). Religiosity was defined as measuring church members commitment and practice of their religion. (Hill et. al, 2000). Religiosity can be used to understand how faithful one is to the teachings of their religion and how often one practices the teachings, and therefore represents behaviors and actions influenced by religion. An organized religion is an entity with a name, constitution, and infrastructure. But it is also the shifting collection of persons, engaged in a complex set of actions and rhetorics, actions that are supported by and indeed define the collectivity they inhabit (Ammerman, 1997). The results of part 1 serve as validation that those claiming a religion are practicing religious behaviors, such as praying, meditating, or thinking about God. This supports the idea that religion can influence behavior, by the values it instills through its religious teachings.

The question on biblical literalism was not studied in depth, but there was an observable trend between religiosity scores, NEP scores, and how literal one believes in the bible (Table 1). The biblical literalism question asked, “Which of the following statements best describes your belief in the Bible?” Answers were, the Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word, the Bible is the inspired word of God, but it was written by men and women and contains some human errors, the Bible is an ancient book of history and legends: God had nothing to do with it, or I do not believe in God.

Among the 201 participants a large majority (68%) claimed an organized religion. This could have influenced the results in favor of organized religions. Of the organized religions, 92

total participants claimed Christianity. This did not provide a strongly diverse group of religions. Receiving high numbers of one religion could have affected religiosity scores and NEP scores.

In part 2, there was a correlation of ($r=-0.187$; $p=0.0122$) between NEP scores and the Centrality of religiosity scores (figure 3). This significant relationship was due greatly in part to the large sample size, $n=201$, and would have little practical or noticeable effect on the general population. Therefore, the data does not support, nor refute, past studies such as those conducted by Lynn White or Andrew Greeley. Also, the survey only received two participants claiming the Jewish or Muslim religion and four claiming the Mormon religion, thus there was not enough data to show statistical significance within those religions. By boosting the number of participants in each religion, perhaps more conclusive results on religions could be found.

One of the reasons that could explain why our data was inconclusive could be because a majority of participants did not have a defining worldview, either anthropocentric or ecocentric, as seen above in figure 4. With over 80% of the population in the mid-range worldview, there was not a large enough population with each defining worldview to compare and make conclusive results. This could be because our sample was comprised of college-aged students, of which may not have extreme views. Perhaps it is because our sample took place solely in Lincoln, Nebraska which borders agricultural towns. Since much of these agricultural towns in Nebraska rely on using natural resources for living in the state, this may encourage an anthropocentric worldview. On a larger scale, perhaps it is just that Americans tend not to take extreme viewpoints most of the time. Any of these characteristics may be responsible for the very neutral results found, or maybe it is a combination of all of them.

A finding that was unexpected was the difference in gender (figure 5). Schultz and his colleagues looked at how one views God (Father/Mother), and hypothesized that those that saw

God as a father would have an anthropocentric worldview because fathers tend to be more dominating, while those that viewed God as a mother would be more ecocentric because mothers tend to be nurturing and loving (Schultz et al., 2000). The results in their study never concluded either way, however it could be possible their study was looking at gender in the wrong light. Instead of focusing the study on how one views God, perhaps it just depends on what gender they are. Our data suggests that women as a whole have a more consolidated and higher NEP score than their male counterparts. By taking Schultz and colleague's train of thought, it is because women are associated with being more nurturing and caring-which translated into women caring for the environment.

Overall, part 2 suggests that religion is not a good indicator of environmental worldviews. Other characteristics, such as gender, may be more influential in forming values, which promote a specific worldview.

Conclusion

This study was completed in Lincoln, Nebraska using college-ages students. This study looked at the relationship between religion and environmental worldviews. First, it was necessary to establish the relationship between religion and religiosity, to analyze if religion influenced values. Religiosity scores were indicative of values, as the score was determined from the religious behaviors being practiced. Results from part 1 showed there was a strong relationship found between religion and one's religiosity score. High religiosity scores among organized religions indicated that participants of that religion are practicing religious action, therefore religion is an influencer of values. Those claiming a non-organized religion, including agnostic, other, or none and Atheism had significantly lower or no religiosity score. After

drawing these conclusions, it was suggested that the relationship between environmental worldviews, religion, and religiosity be studied.

The second part of this study then analyzed the relationship between religion and environmental worldviews. Although it was shown that religion is an influencer to religious values, it is unknown if religion is an influencer to environmental values. Previous work claimed that “especially in Western form, Christianity is the most anthropogenic religion the world has seen” (White, 1967). Results from part 2 indicate otherwise, in which the average NEP scores were not significantly varied among the religions. Religion did not seem to be responsible for influencing the values related to one’s environmental worldview. Overall the data showed weak support for the hypothesis. Results would have little practical or noticeable effect on the general population, and should therefore not be considered significant. Religious social structures may still be an avenue for promoting positive environmental behavior, since no significantly negative relationship was found. Educating religious figureheads and encouraging them to value the environment could decrease the damage done to our environment by humans.

Further Research

In reflection of this study, it is suggested that if research were conducted again, it would be beneficial to ask one’s Christian Denomination and to focus on only one religion at a time. Focusing on one religion at a time would provide a deeper look at what causes the religiosity scores variation within the religion. Further research could include analyzing biblical literalism more in depth. Finally, further research should consider looking into gender as an influencer, and if genders of different regions have different religiosity scores and worldviews. One way to approach this would be to look at differences among genders in different regions. For example, females from the United States compared to females from Iraq. Since the social

expectations of women in these two countries vary, one would expect their environmental worldview to also vary.

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Appendix A

Which of the following statements best describes your beliefs in the Bible?

- ☐ The Bible is the actual word of God and should be taken literally, word for word.
- ☐ The Bible is the inspired word of God, but it was written by men and women and contains some human errors.
- ☐ The Bible is an ancient book of history and legends: God had nothing to do with it.
- ☐ I do not believe in the Bible.

Ekceberg and Blocker's Biblical Literalism (Schultz et al., 2008).

For the past 90 days how often have you done the following:

	Never	Rarely	Once/Month	Twice/Month	Once/Week	Twice/week	Almost Daily	More than once/day
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Thought about God								
Prayed								
Meditated								
Attended worship services								
Read of studies scriptures/holy writings								
Had direct experiences of God								

The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (Huber and Huber 2012).

Plants and animals have as much right as humans to exist. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Neither Agree nor Disagree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree 	Despite our special abilities, humans are subject to the laws of nature. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Neither Agree nor Disagree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree
Humans were meant to rule over the rest of Nature. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Neither Agree nor Disagree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree 	Humans have the right to modify the natural environment to suit their needs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="radio"/> Disagree <input type="radio"/> Neither Agree nor Disagree <input type="radio"/> Agree <input type="radio"/> Strongly Agree

New Ecological Paradigm (Schultz et al., 2008).

Appendix B

What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

What is your religious preference?

☐ Christian

☐ Roman Catholic

☐ Protestant

☐ Jewish

☐ Seventh-Day Adventist

☐ Muslim

☐ Mormon

☐ Orthodox

☐ Something else (Please Specify)

What is your age?

☐ 19-20

☐ 21-22

☐ 23-24

☐ 25-26

☐ Other

How would you describe your political views?

☐ Very Conservative

☐ Conservative

☐ Moderate

☐ Liberal

☐ Very Liberal